

### ARTPLAY - ARTIST ESSAYS NO.6 NILGÜN GÜVEN



## PURPOSE

The aim of this paper is to discuss the concept INCLUSIVE; its place and influences, value and importance, methods and practice, and process and possibilities, which inform the experience of working as an artist with children and families at ArtPlay, where being inclusive is a guiding principle. I will try to unpack the concept of being inclusive from my experience and point of view as a participatory, collaborative theatre and community arts practitioner who has designed, led and supported several ArtPlay workshops from 2006 to 2012. I will critically reflect on two different ArtPlay workshops: Trust Objects, a 2010 public program for preschoolers, and The Gathering Place, a 2011 Indigenous Playgroup Community workshop. I will discuss how being inclusive has guided me in the concept development, planning and preparation, delivery, experience and evaluation of these workshops.

## INTRODUCTION - PHILOSOPHY, FORM AND PROCESS

I have always been creative. I enjoy working with my hands, mind and body. I take pleasure in the simple act of people having fun together through art and play. I love seeing how people transpose conventional and non-traditional theatre tasks and games, how they connect with others and how they present or inhabit creativity in a natural but performative way. I hope for the workshop environment to be a place and time where children and families can feel safe and comfortable to take creative risks.

I often overlap art forms such as music, writing, spoken word, improvisation, performance, movement, photography, visual arts, 3D art, film, sound; and set, costume and prop design. In doing so, I explore themes, create new experiences and refine the craft of engaging different numbers and combinations of people in one-off, short term or long term creative projects. I also work as a director, facilitator, community artist, designer, support worker, musician, writer and performer. These opportunities have allowed me to gain insights and to develop trust and confidence in my skills and knowledge. My empathy and understanding of participants' points of view and experiences allows me to support people both creatively and personally within the collaborative process.

When designing and facilitating arts projects for diverse groups, I tend to be flexible and accepting, as the very nature of inclusive art encourages, acknowledges and incorporates authentic contributions from the participants. My workshops blend focussed enquiry and activity, open-ended explorations, semi-structured tasks and moments of 'going with the flow'. Children and families frequently:

- go through stages of togetherness through ensemble work and group activities
- develop intimate, creative relationships through solos and duets
- harness discoveries by layering multiple art forms within space and time
- appreciate performance by placing the audience in various relationships to themselves as performers

My skills, knowledge and experience serve as a toolbox for people to access alternate pathways towards self-expression, group work, devising and performing. The toolbox broadens possibilities for people to be involved. Having accessible and inclusive tools at hand along with organisational support and resources can allow the project to appeal to a wider variety of interests, ages and abilities. It can also serve to facilitate understanding, inspiration and motivation, which is essential if you want to include everyone and if one aspires to feel included. Working at ArtPlay has given me the opportunity to see what can happen at the point where my practice, children, families and the organisation meet. I have explored new ideas and objectives. I have played with different combinations of art forms. I have situated workshops both inside and outside the ArtPlay building. I have partnered with new artists and collaborated with other companies. I have had a depth of engagement with pre-schoolers, students and culturally diverse communities.

As children are inherently creative beings, their imaginings and creations through art and play essentially makes working with them an intriguing and evolving form of action-led research about inclusivity.

## **CASE STUDIES: TRUST OBJECTS AND SHADOW PLAY**

### **How the principle of inclusivity influences preparation and delivery of two different ArtPlay workshops.**

Trust Objects was a forty-five minute workshop designed for children between two to five years of age and their family members. Steve Azjenberg, Rawcus ensemble member and wheelchair user with an acquired brain injury, was in the role of support artist. The aim of the workshop was for children and families to be introduced to the concept of "the other" through stimulating and sensitive explorations of the sound and movement of wheelchairs and people. Through Trust Objects I wished to nurture positive encounters, interactions and perceptions of people with disabilities and to potentially demystify preconceptions or assumptions associated with people who are wheelchair users. The workshop allowed a direct, first-hand and authentic experience of working with a person with a disability who identifies as a performer and artist. It allowed people to discover and use the mechanical and creative capabilities of a wheelchair, in both adult and child sizes. The participatory nature of the workshop environment encouraged different ways for children and parents to exercise respectful explorations of power and status, play in inventive and performative ways, and to hopefully gain understanding and insights into inclusive art processes (fig.1).



Fig. 2

### **SHADOW PLAY WITH GATHERING PLACE INDIGENOUS PLAYGROUP**

Shadow Play was a ninety minute, multi-layered workshop with wide-ranging ideas to engage a community group visiting ArtPlay for the first time. The brief was to offer a workshop experience for potentially ten children between the ages of eighteen months to five years, with eight mums and two grandmothers. Previously, the playgroup's creative art and play activities had included painting and craft, but they were open to any art form. It was a welcoming, information-sharing, arts and social experience, hosted by Jessica Adams, ArtPlay's Community Liaison Officer. The workshop was delivered by myself, facilitating the performance elements, in collaboration with Tara Prowse, a

multimedia community artist. Tara capture silhouetted moving images on a time-lapse camera and took close-up photographic stills that revealed the action and interplay of people behind the screen (fig.2). Shadow Play provided enough content to be played back to the group as a short stop-animation style quirky film and a slideshow of intimate, endearing and amusing moments. It was important for the artists, group and ArtPlay to observe these pieces of footage as a culmination and celebration of their experience. The playgroup members were able to take the film home to share with family and friends.

## **1. PRE-PLANNING**

### **1. Communication between ArtPlay and artist: knowledge versus discovery**

Before I plan a workshop, I usually ask a lot of questions and gather as much information as I am able. Even then, I accept that there will be many things to learn or discover later. Plans can often change on the day or in the moment.

Some questions that I may ask are:

When is the workshop? How many workshops are there? How long is the workshop? Where will it take place? What time is it scheduled? Who is targeted? What is the maximum group size? What is an acceptable minimum group size? What is the age range? With whom may the children attend? Are there any special needs or access requirements to take into consideration? When will the organisation know know this information? When will I know? What would be of interest or benefit? Can I seek ArtPlay's advice, support or feedback? Are there any cultural sensitivities I need to be aware of? How many support officers are available in the workshop? What is their role? What can I ask of them?

### **2. Developing the concept: assessing the connection between inclusivity, people and ideas**

When I have a sense of who is attending and whether the objectives are open or within a brief, I centre my plan and approach on a variety of over-lapping art forms and ideas that I think will be accessible to and inclusive of these participants.

Some questions that I may consider are:

What should I offer? What would I like to offer and explore? What will they like or enjoy? What is it about? How can I offer this? What do I need? Can I collaborate with someone else? What does it actually involve? How do we get there? What is most important? How can they enter into this process? How should we start? Where do we want it to end? What do the children and families and ArtPlay need to know? Can the plan change and shift? What sorts of things could affect the plan? What impact would this have on the people and/or the process? What can I do about it? How much do I tell them? How much do we experience through participation, observation, questioning and feedback? Should it be structured? Do I need music? When and where do I need music? What sort of music? Do I need props or other materials? Do I have enough time? Can ArtPlay provide adequate support or resources for people with different needs, if required?

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

At this stage I have made certain decisions about the plan and all that may be required, whether it be organising materials, meeting with other artists, communicating further with ArtPlay to receive updates on attendance and sometimes even testing the idea first with a pilot group of children and adults. In Trust Objects I needed to ensure that adults and children could experience the process together, hence I sourced wheelchairs of all sizes. I was also mindful of the need to assess the risks involved at any stage of the plan and to clearly communicate the importance of working together with these objects in a safe way. I had to adjust my plans for the Shadow Play workshop as only four adults and two children under two years of age attended. At this point, adapting the workshop plan

to suit such young children, and more adults than children, was important. The style and direction of the workshop was influenced by this so it would include more free play and open ended exploration at the children's pace and ability.

## **THE WORKSHOP**

### **1. Welcome and Warm Up**

Being friendly and open to meet and greet everyone individually is a good start to any workshop. Allowing time for people to arrive, settle down and orient themselves to the space and each other is a good way to enable them ease into the environment. This also allows the artist to observe all the different people in the room, and their relationships, behaviour and personalities. This part can vary from a few minutes to up to half an hour as in the Shadow Play workshop. Warming up together in a circle is a comfortable and achievable way for people to see and listen to each other. Warm up exercises and games are a great way to awaken one's senses - both physically and mentally. This is an introduction to the philosophies of 'having a go', 'going with the flow' and the notion that we can all contribute and accept each other's offers in a respectful way. It is a chance to instill fun, spontaneity and freedom in people, much like an ice breaker. It can begin the bonding process that requires cooperation and openness to other people's personalities, ideas and abilities. An effective warm up can minimise the incidence of non-participation.

For an artist, the warm up is an introduction into who makes up this unique group of people. You may gain insight into their motivation, energy levels, attitudes and confidence. These clues will assist in how you present, approach and invite others to enter into the creative process. In Trust Objects introductions and warming up was swift and energetic as I could sense a keenness to get to the heart of the workshop - the wheelchairs. However, in order to reach the workshop's aims and objectives, I also had to maintain some sense of structure by moving the children through the different stages. In the Shadow Play workshop I invested more time in the warm up stage as I knew both children and adults were completely new to the ArtPlay environment, new to the art forms and new to the process of working creatively as a group. I noticed that some people were extremely shy, and feeling uncertain and less confident to jump straight into the workshop. I therefore needed to be flexible according to their level of comfort. Depending on what I may know or gather during introductions and warming up, I generally work with the group to find a pace that suits everyone. Things may happen quickly or slowly, I may need to sit with an artistic moment or person for a bit longer to ensure an inclusive culture and mode develops to balance everyone's individual needs, learning styles and abilities. I often demonstrate ideas through body language and use plain English to verbally convey instructions. Repetition and clarification is also useful to break down complex ideas into simple ones.

During Trust Objects I asked the group to stand in two lines on opposite sides of the space. This may sound like a simple request for young children, but to my surprise I noticed the message went amiss as people either remained where they were or huddled in small groups all around the space. I assumed, then, that the concept of forming lines, let alone opposite each other, was a new, unknown or badly communicated idea for preschoolers. In that moment I had to assess how important this instruction was to the process. I deemed that it would still be most useful and finally found success when I clearly gestured towards either side of the room with both of my arms, directing one group of participants this way and the other group that way. I could then carry on with the workshop.

### **2. Exercises and Tasks**

The exercises and tasks that I present are often practical ways to introduce concepts and themes and to develop shared experiences through skill development. Whether the workshop is open-ended or semi-structured, it is helpful to have a variety of approaches for people to work together, such

as in pairs or solo, so there is flexibility for people to adopt different roles. Both Trust Objects and Shadow Play provided opportunities for children and families to try new ideas, exercise choice and control, explore and stretch personal boundaries, and to learn from others. In Trust Objects people engaged as leaders and followers, movers and dancers, musicians and composers, and performers and audience. In Shadow Play, the adults and children would interpret instructions and respond to these tasks in ways that reflected their strengths, interests and comfort levels. Enthusiasm and confidence increased when they took on explorations as a group as opposed to individually. The creative content and performative material was made up of unique intergenerational relationships and friendships between members of the play group.

As an inclusive arts practitioner, I often anticipate how people make connections between seemingly disparate ideas. Different tasks allow people to find the meaning of an idea in their own way. As I don't believe there is a right or wrong way to creatively express one's self, what we sometimes see, hear or find during a workshop are memorable, surprising, baffling, entertaining, meaningful and unique moments of connection that for an artist are the ingredients of a dynamic, engaging and compelling recipe.

### **3. Show and Tell from the workshop process**

Show and tell at different stages in the workshop is an important aspect of understanding theatre, drama and performance. With direction, participants can transform drama exercises into short works that can be performed in front of an audience. They have the opportunity to rehearse, refine, change, repeat or clarify intention. Show and tell is an opportunity for everyone to encounter the work in a new light. Showings can be discrete and informal or they can be deliberate and obvious. When people are asked to consider where they would like to perform in the space and at what vantage point the audience should view the work, they usually make intuitive and clear choices. This can lead to other avenues of exploration such as costume, set and props.

In a one-off workshop, people's needs often come more to the fore than their artistic experience. I try to highlight artistic possibilities from which people can choose along the way. For example if a pair of children have explored a variety of movement scores, their work can be elevated to a performance level simply and effectively by selecting appropriate music to accompany the duet. Sound and music play a very important role in a performing arts workshop.

Trust Objects had many live and immediate moments for show and tell throughout the process. The group was large and there was an abundance of creative material. The showings served as a way to continue to encourage and inspire participants, building their confidence. Everyone had an increased feeling of inclusion through the shared experience. They became familiar with the idea of performing in front of others and were inspired to take other creative risks. They revealed more of themselves during their performances and as the workshop progressed.

Show and tell requires people to acknowledge, respect and trust the different ways that people have contributed to the creative process. However, if I had made a similar decision in Shadow Play, ignoring the personal and creative challenges that I sensed the participants were facing, a poorly timed showing may have left people feeling less confident and more uncomfortable than ever intended. Nevertheless the Shadow Play workshop design was clear about how and when an outcome may be expected. The children and adults received a brief before attending the workshop that footage would be taken throughout the whole process to be shown only at the end. This helped to build a sense of anticipation, encouraging people to stay motivated, connected and focussed. When, finally, at the end of the workshop the film and intimate slideshow were projected onto a big screen, what were otherwise ephemeral and transient workshop moments suddenly became larger than life and the boldness or intimacy of the images both delighted and moved the children and adults into quiet reflection.

#### **4. Feedback and reflection**

Towards the end of a workshop I often I ask for people to reflect on their experience of the workshop. This can include sharing highlights or making suggestions. People often comment on others and acknowledge what they enjoyed watching as much as what they liked doing. It is always valuable for me to hear comments which can improve my practice. It is not unusual for feelings, thoughts and ideas to emerge that differ from the workshop's initial intention or aim.

***“This workshop is one of the most valuable things we did with our children in their pre-school years. A big thank you.”***

*Parent comment about Trust Objects.*

## **CONCLUSION**

In embracing diversity and social inclusion, artists, workers and organisations are challenged to overcome certain barriers to arts participation, thus increasing the opportunity for people with different needs and backgrounds to access and enjoy the same activities as other members of society. Inclusive models of participation may lead to a greater sense of wellbeing and belonging, improved participation, and a sense of achievement, all of which actively shape our personal and artistic lives. The way towards this is to respect, learn, understand and appreciate diversity and the variety of roles that we can adopt in an arts setting. ArtPlay models inclusivity and supportive communication by bringing together artists, children and families to explore a wide range of quality art and play activities through its accessible programming and services. Much like the participants and artists who are at the centre of creative processes, ArtPlay is also involved in evaluating and challenging ideas and values around inclusive principles. The interconnectedness of inclusion with ArtPlay's other principles - supporting, connecting, inspiring, collaborating, connecting and play - is simply, at its best, a complex system. I have always felt that ArtPlay values inclusion and embraces diversity and, like myself, ArtPlay will always have much to learn, as long as families, children and artists constantly walk through that orange door.